Dealing with feelings of guilt and shame after a traumatic event

Information for patients
Department of Psychological Services
A note on distress

It is possible that when you first read this booklet you may feel upset. This is a normal reaction. It could be that reading this reminds you of your traumatic event.

If you feel that you are getting too upset, put the booklet down and do something else. You can return to it another time when you feel able to. If you find that every time you try to read this booklet you experience very strong feelings such as a racing heart or vivid flashbacks where you feel like you are losing touch with reality, it may be that you need help in working through your traumatic experience. We advise you to discuss this with your doctor.
Guilt

The recovery process after a traumatic event can be a long one and tends to occur in stages. At each stage, different strong feelings may come to the surface\(^1\). For example, immediately after a traumatic event you may feel a lot of fear, anger or rage. However, as time moves on and you begin to deal with these feelings you may find other strong emotions start to surface, for example, guilt, self blame and shame\(^1\).

Guilt often develops when you think that you have done something wrong. Each person has standards they set for themselves and when these have not been reached they feel guilty. While it is common to have feelings of guilt after a trauma, if these feelings are too strong or last a long time then they can stop you from coming to terms with what happened\(^2\).

**What types of guilt can people feel after a traumatic event?**

There are many reasons why you may experience guilt after a traumatic event. Some of these are discussed below.

**Guilt about the event\(^2\)**

It is common to keep thinking about what happened over and over again. You may blame yourself or question whether you reacted in the best way.

Looking back at what happened you might be taking responsibility and blame yourself for what you feel you did or didn’t do to help others\(^1\). For example, you might tell yourself ‘I couldn’t help because I froze with fear’. You might not have expected yourself to react in this way and as a result you blame yourself.

You might take responsibility and blame yourself for not preventing something from happening, for instance a car accident. You might be thinking, ‘if only I had walked that day instead of taking the car’.
Survivor guilt

If you experienced a traumatic event where someone else was badly injured or died you may feel guilt because you survived when others didn’t. This is called survivor guilt. Often people feeling like this will find the question ‘why them and not me?’ going over and over in their mind. Or you may feel responsible for the person’s death, or think the other person should have survived instead of you.

Guilt about your work or home life

Illnesses or injuries, can need long-term treatment, and this may also lead to feelings of guilt. This might be because you have been unable to return to work or to take on your usual home responsibilities. You may be concerned that this has put pressure on other people.

Guilt or shame about your emotional reaction

You may also feel guilt or shame about how this is affecting you emotionally.

In the past you might have always felt able to cope with life. Now however, you may experience strong feelings that you have never had before. You may feel the need to ask for help and depend on others. Perhaps you see this as a sign of weakness in yourself, rather than understanding that the way you are feeling is a normal reaction to severe stress.

You may sometimes feel very angry and irritable and take this out on your close family and friends who are nearest to you. This too may lead to feelings of guilt.
Why do people feel guilty after a traumatic event?

In our daily lives we feel that things are predictable and controllable. However, this is not the case for many traumatic events. These tend to be the opposite - unpredictable and uncontrollable. After a traumatic event people sometimes think ‘if only I had done this’ or ‘if only I hadn’t done that’\(^{3}\). People sometimes take the blame for something, instead of recognising that it was beyond their control\(^{1}\). Traumatic events, like disasters, happen and are not controlled or planned. They are out of the ordinary.

As part of your recovery, it is important to work towards understanding that some things can happen that are unpredictable. ‘It is possible to simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time and that trauma can affect anyone’\(^ {3}\). Coming to terms with this may mean accepting that traumatic events can happen, but it also helps to avoid feelings of guilt\(^{3}\).

What can I do to help myself?

‘It is unhelpful to stay focused on the past. While you can learn from the past you cannot change it’\(^{2}\). It can be helpful for you to think about how you feel. Read through the next section and think about how it relates to you:

1. Accept that you are not in control of everything and that traumatic events are not planned and it is possible to be in the wrong place at the wrong time\(^{3}\).

2. Accept how you reacted at the time of the event. Often in times of extreme stress a person will not react as they think they would have done otherwise. Your body may have frozen with fear and your survival instinct may have taken over.

3. Accept your response - you are only human\(^{1}\).
4. When dealing with your guilt, it is important to remember that making mistakes is part of being human. We all fail to live up to our own standards or do things we feel are wrong. Coming to terms with your contribution to the traumatic event means recognising your own imperfections and accepting yourself with your shortcomings. It is important to recognise your good qualities and your bad qualities, your strengths and your weaknesses\(^2\).

5. Accept help and support from family, friends and professionals around you to overcome the trauma and move forward.

6. Start to accept yourself, again, one step at a time.

**When do I need to seek help?**

Feelings of guilt or shame, like other post-traumatic reactions, need to be worked through slowly. For most people they will begin to reduce after 3 - 6 months have passed. There is no firm rule, and everyone is different. Sometimes being in hospital for a long time can delay the process significantly. However, if your feelings of guilt and shame are still present after this time or they become worse, then it is important that you ask for help. It is important to seek help if:

- You notice increases in activities you do to cope with stress, such as eating, smoking or drinking, or you start to take drugs (without medical supervision) to cope with your feelings
- You feel that you want to harm yourself or others around you
- You notice you are taking unnecessary or dangerous risks
- You feel you have nowhere to turn
- You feel too overwhelmed to talk about your experience and some time has passed since the event
How do I seek help?

If you feel you need more help to deal with these issues:

- If you are still attending hospital for treatment, you can discuss how you feel with a member of staff.
- There are psychological services based at the Northern General Hospital. A psychologist can help you to understand and work through your difficulties. You could discuss the possibility of your referral to a clinical psychologist with a member of staff.
- Talk to your G.P. about how you are feeling. They will be able to refer you to an appropriate person.

Further suggested reading

"Overcoming Traumatic Stress" by Claudia Herbert & Ann Wetmore, 1999. Published by Constable & Robinson Ltd.

"Trauma is Really Strange" by Steve Haines & Sophie Standing, 2015. Published by Singing Dragon.
Acknowledgements

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